Translated from the Night

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo

Translated by Robert Ziller

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courtesy of Dr. Beverly Mendheim
(photographer unknown)

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R.Z.

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Introduction

Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo, born Joseph-Casimir, entered the world on March 4, 1901 in Tananarive (now Antananarivo), the capital of Madagascar, the world's fourth largest island, a truly exotic jewel set in the Indian Ocean off the Southeast coast of Africa. Born in poverty just five years after the island nation had become a French colony, he was the only child of an unwed mother of noble heritage whose family wealth had been lost.

At the age of 13, he was expelled from the College Saint-Michel for refusing to join the religious order; after briefly attending public school, he abandoned formal education and began working at various petty jobs which colonial society offered. In 1924 he began work as a proofreader at the Imprimerie de l'Imerina, and though he was employed without pay for the first two years, he kept this low paying job for the rest of his life. To its credit, the printing house published several of Rabearivelo's books in limited editions, which was probably reason enough for him to stay there.

Rabearivelo married Mary Razafitrimo, a photographers' daughter, in 1926, and together they had five children. Family tragedy struck in 1933 when their daughter Voaghany suddenly took ill and died at the age of three - a loss that Rabearivelo attributed to the incompetence and malice of the reigning authorities. Domestic difficulties were further

compounded by the colonial government, which continually refused to allow him to travel to Paris, where it may have been feasible for him to make a living creatively - a nearly impossible task in Madagascar, where he wrote for a mostly illiterate population. In debt throughout his life, and even jailed for it, his financial woes were an admixture of low wages, gambling, a love for acquiring books, and a sweet tooth for opium. A voracious reader, and primarily self-taught, he wrote poetry in three languages: French, Malagasy, and Spanish. Dedicated to preserving the Malagasy culture, he edited anthologies of the native poetry and was involved in two literary periodicals, *18° Latitude Sud* and *Capricorne*, reviewing his contemporaries under the pseudonym of A.Valmond. Of about 20 literary works accounted for, including poetry, plays, fiction, and literary criticism, it appears that only half of these works were published at the time of his death.

On the afternoon of June 23, 1937, after having dispatched letters of farewell, Rabearivelo took his own life with cyanide, faithfully recording his final moments in his *Calepins Bleu (Blue Notebooks)*, a personal journal of some 1,800 pages. He was just 36 years old, and may have had tuberculosis. (Of note, nearly 40 years later, in 1975, the average life span of a Malagasy male was only 44 years). Tragically, he died just prior to the flowering of the Négritude movement in Paris, having never met Césaire, Senghor, and other African luminaries. Nevertheless,

at the time of his death, Rabearivelo was recognized as Africa's first modern poet.

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of his passing, celebrations were held on three continents in the cities of Newark, Paris, and Antananarivo, which included a week-long international symposium at the University of Madagascar, somewhat ironically entitled: "Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo: The Unknown?"

Rabearivelo's earlier works were largely imitative of the French symbolists, written in strictly metered verse. His first venture into free verse was *Presque-Songes (Almost Dreams)* in 1934, followed by *Traduit de la Nuit (Translated from the Night)* in 1935. Interestingly, Rabearivelo stated that he originally wrote these poems in Malagasy, and then translated them into French. With remarkable originality, he synthesized Europe's prevailing urban surrealism with his own comparatively bucolic surroundings. In Rabearivelo, we are offered the best aspects of two poetic traditions: the wildly innovative imagery of modern surrealism, permeated with the essence of traditional oral poetry: clear communication. For when reading Rabearivelo, unlike many other Surrealist-influenced modern poets, we never feel that we've been given a superfluous display of linguistic dexterity devoid of meaning - however brilliantly imaginative or mysterious a poem may be, an implied trust welcomes its content. Here, we know, there is something of relevance being poetically manifested by a man

isolated on an island, who wishes to communicate his thoughts to the rest of the world. His poems are often deceptively simple, uniquely surreal yet logical, both sensual and abstract - yet they always bear the distinction of being infused with undeniable sincerity.

Although Rabearivelo mentions Virgil, Whitman, and Tagore in his poems, and obviously enjoyed reading Aesop and La Fontaine, perhaps the most pervasive influence throughout his work is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the classic anthology of transformational lore:

it is its youth, O my child,
its eternal youth:
metamorphosis
(perhaps by the grace of songs of the poets
you prefer,
who create a religion for you
within this silence without end
peopled with columns and streams,
with the living and the dead) ...

The final chapter of Ovid's masterwork contains the knot which binds the entire text: the exposition of the beliefs of Pythagoras, the renowned geometry teacher, regarding the transmigration of the soul. According to Pythagoras, the soul, acquiring different bodies through continual rebirth, literally undergoes metamorphosis, just as the legends recounted by Ovid.

Clearly, Rabearivelo regards metamorphosis as a fact of life, with many of his poems deriving their beauty from transformations which he plays upon the reader: one's eyes turn into fruits, or stars, with the book itself taking the form of a bird, or a flower, a kite, or a cloud.

In an often startling manner, metamorphosis serves as a poignant motif throughout his poetry, a means by which Rabearivelo creates a personal mythos of his own salvation, while adhering to a seemingly quixotic belief in the sanctity of literature.

R.Ziller

Translated from the Night

In Memoriam

Fagus, Marcel Ormoy and Robert-Jules Allain, examiners hereafter of a night which can only convey itself through the astonishment and anguish of our sorrow.

J-J. Rabearivelo

Translated from the Night

"On account of my footing
in the heart of night
I'm a man entangled
in a net of stars."

Jules Supervielle

1

A purple star
evolves in the depths of sky –
what a flower of blood
that blooms in the prairie of night

evolves, evolves,
then becomes like a paper kite
loosened from a sleepy child.

Appearing to approach
and withdraw at the same time,
losing its color like a flower about to fall,
becoming a cloud, becoming white,
reducing itself:
to nothing more than a point of diamond
scoring the zenith's blue mirror
where one already sees the glorious
lure of the nubile morn.

2

What invisible rat,
come from the walls of night,
nibbles the milky cake of the moon?
Tomorrow morning,
when it will have slipped away,
there will be traces of blood-stained teeth.

Tomorrow morning,
those who have been drunk all night,
and those who will be leaving the games,
upon seeing the moon,
will stammer thus:
“Whose coin is this
rolling across the green table?”
“Ah!” one of them will say,
“our friend lost everything
and killed himself!”

And all will snigger,
and staggering, will fall.
The moon, she will no longer be there:
the rat will have carried her away, into his hole.

3

The hide of the black cow has been stretched,
stretched without being set to dry,
stretched within its sevenfold shadow.

But who has felled the black cow,
dead without having lowed,
dead without having roared,
dead without having been pursued
over this prairie flowered with stars?
Here is the one who lodges in half of the sky.

Stretched is the hide
over a box resonant with winds
sculpted by the spirits of sleep.

And the drum is ready
when gladioli crown
the horns of the delivered calf
who bounds
and grazes the hills of grass.

There it will resound,
and its incantations will become dreams
until the moment when the black cow is
resurrected,
white and pink,
before a river of light.

4

What is happening beneath the earth,
at the remote nadir?
Lean over a fountain,
near a river
or over a spring:
there you will see the moon
fallen into a hole,
and there you will see yourself,
luminous and silent,
among the trees without roots,
and where the mute birds alight.

5

You sleep, my beloved;
you sleep in her arms, O my last born.
I can't see your eyes heavy with night
which usually shine iridescently
like genuine pearls,
or ripe grapes.

A strong gust of wind pushes open our door,
it makes your nightgown billow
and trembles your hair,
then carries away a paper from my table
that I recover by the doorway.

I lift my head,
the poem begun in my hand:
your eyes blink in the azure,
and I call them: stars.

6

A bird without color and without name
has folded its wings
and wounded the sole eye of the sky.

He alights upon a tree without trunk,
all covered in leaves
that no wind can stir
and from which no one harvests the fruits,
the open eyes.

What is he brooding over?
When he resumes his flight,
it will be roosters that emerge:
the roosters from all the villages
who will have vanquished and dispersed
those who sing in dreams
and who are nourished by stars.

7

Ebb of the oceanic light.
The octopi, in their drivel,
blacken the sand
with their thick ink;
but countless little fish
which resemble shells of silver,
not able to escape,
struggle therein:
they are taken with nets
stiffened by dark seaweed
that become lianas
and invade the cliffs of heaven.

8

The devotee has finished her daily verses
and comes to listen to her children
who learn with loud voices
their biblical lessons
beneath the veranda.
One would think of a distant cascade
leaping over some mossy rocks,
over there, behind the hills,
or of Christians surprised by the shadows
reciting Islamic suras
under the peaceful sky.

I,
through the interstices of leaves falling down
like dark tears that never cease to flow,
I cannot discern anything there
and hear only bits of phrases
where often return the words: Egypt
and Israel.

I raise myself up onto a mound of earth
smelling of tread upon grass,
and I pull back the foliage that hinders my vision;
a small migrating bird sobs near the summit;
and I raise my head;
but it's the stars I see:

bulbous as garlic,
speckled like quails,
they bring back to me the prayers
that I have just confused,
and within the desert of Imerinian azure
there it seems to me that the Exodus
is again eluding the Pharaohs,
behold how Religions meet each other –
and you also, O my own, O Poetry!

9

The secret hives are aligned
near the lianas of heaven,
among the luminous nests.

Gather nectar there, bees of my thoughts,
little bees winged with sound
within the pregnant cloud of silence;
laden yourself with resin
perfumed with stars and wind:
we will seal all the gaps
communicating with the tumult of life.

Laden yourself also with stellar pollen
for the prairies of the earth;
and tomorrow, when there will be wreathed
the wild roses of my poems,
we will have celestial rose hips
and sidereal seeds.

10

You there,
standing and naked!
mud you are and you remember it;
but you are in truth the child of that parturient
darkness
who indulges himself in lunar milk,
then you slowly take the form of a tree trunk
by this low wall which is crossed over by
the dreams of flowers
and the perfume of summer at rest.

To feel, to believe that roots push out from
your feet and race and writhe like thirsty
serpents toward some subterranean source,
or grip onto the sand
and already bind you to it, you, O living,
tree unknown, tree unidentified,
who fashions the fruits you will gather
yourself.

Your crown,
within your hair which the wind shakes,
conceals a nest of immaterial birds;
and when you come to lay in my bed
and when I acknowledge you,
O my errant brother, your touch, your breath,
and the scent of your skin
will rouse the flutter of mysterious wings
reaching to the very frontiers of sleep.

11

How many twins are they, the winds?
They are all mischievous,
they pursue each other in going out of the grass,
scaling walls becoming twofold,
leaping over roofs where dew will gather,
arching over hills
and there shaking the tops of immaterial trees
from where scatter the birds
with eyes of glass
who haven't nests anywhere,
and the round berries like quartz crystals
that can't reproduce on the earth,
and dissolve into shooting stars.

12

For the paupers
preyed upon by bugs as large as the sky,
for the exiles who wander,
coming from the city of light,
and for the rebels and deserters
of the shadowy army rising from the earth,
what are they after, these surges
of countless palm trees
gleaming like so many shafts of spears
polished with plant oils,
that soar up immobile
and pass beyond all the houses
until their tops,
resonant with the dreams of ringdoves,
reach to the roof of the world?

They undulate there, they push each other,
then shed their leaves,
but do not return among the living,
and gather together in the desert of stars
and become countless huts
for beggars without beds,
for captives clothed in only their bare skin
reeking of dust,
and for all the birds without nests
who will be freed together.

13

All the seasons are abolished
in these unexplored zones,
which occupy half the world
and adorn it with flowerings unknown
and of no climate.

A thrust of provisional vegetable blood
within an entanglement of dark lianas,
wherein is captive all the élan of living branches.
Rout of birds become strangers
and no longer recognizing their nest,
then wings collide – lightning –
against the crags of mist
surging from the soil
which is neither hot nor cold
like the skin of those who lay themselves down
far from life and from death.

14

Here
the one whose eyes are prisms of sleep
and whose eyelids are heavy with dreams,
the one whose feet are planted in the sea
and whose glutinous hands emerge from it
laden with coral and blocks of sparkling salt.

She will place them in little piles
by a foggy gulf
and sell them to naked sailors
who have had their tongues cut out,
until the rain begins to fall.

She will no longer be visible then,
and we will see nothing but
her hair dispersed by the wind;
like a ball of seaweed which unwinds itself,
and perhaps as well,
some grains of insipid salt.

15

You delude yourself,
you who don the air of a little bird
astray in a snowy forest that reaches
as far as the breast of Tagore,
of Whitman and Jammes
who replace the Christ hanging over your bed,
since it isn't the oldness of the world
nor that of day so many thousands of times over
which caresses now its beard white
and thick as oblivion,
like hope and like the haze of torrid mornings
over there, above all the mountains,
an astrologer consulting the stars
and smoking a clay pipe,
it is its youth, O my child,
its eternal youth:
metamorphosis
(perhaps by the grace of songs of the poets you prefer,
who create a religion for you
within this silence without end
peopled with columns and streams,
with the living and the dead)
it is no more than the shadow of all things past
and hears nothing but the sole present.

16

They are innumerable rusted hands,
– waves, shadows, fumes –
that weed and layer
in a thicket of raspberry bushes,
overrun by grasses the height of giants
from which nothing emerges but blind birds.

What will they reap, once weary?
What will there be between
their fingers of wind?
The soft dark berries
in the prime of their redness
have already become countless mushrooms
on the banks of that river without canoeists
to take on board all these baskets
of nocturnal fruits.

17

The black glassmaker,
of whom no one has ever looked upon
his countless eyes,
and his shoulders, even,
that none has ever made shrug,
this slave all adorned with beads of glass,
who is robust as Atlas
and who carries the seven heavens upon his head,
people say the multifarious river of clouds
will carry him away,
the river where his loincloth has already been soaked.

Thousands and thousands of fragments of glass
fall from his hands
but rebound towards his brow
bruised by the mountains
where the winds are born.

And you witness his daily torment
and his labor without end;
you witness his thunderstruck agony
as sea conches resound
to the ramparts of the East —
but you no longer feel pity for him,
and it no longer even occurs to you
that his suffering begins again
each time the sun capsizes.

18

You have just re-read Virgil,
you have also just listened to the children
who greet the new moon,
and the tales and fables
of those who are no longer.

Is it the bucolic hour,
O heart aspiring to rest,
heart as sunburnt as the rocks?

The shepherds? They aren't here;
their flocks? Look at these wild goats,
to the horns turning in the mist.
Their staffs? See how the trees unite their tops.

The shepherds are over there,
they climb the sky.
There is fresh grass beneath their footsteps,
there are unreal fruits about them,
and hidden sources that they seek.

And you, and you,
you believe you are Corydon,
while before you, appears one like Alexis
who breathes into the flutes
that have become all the branches.

19

There will be a day, a young poet
who will realize your impossible vow
by having come to know your books
as rare as underground flowers,
your books written for a hundred friends,
and not for one, and not for a thousand.

On the dark gulf where he will re-read you
by just the glow of his heart
where yours will beat again,
he will not see you
in the peaceful swells
that will always be filled with sunless depths,
nor in the sand, nor in the red earth,
nor under the rocks devoured by lichen
that extend behind him
to the land of the living,
blind and deaf since Genesis.
He will lift his head
and think that it's in the azure,
among the stars and winds,
that your tomb will have been raised.

20

How many times relieved
and how often the very same ones,
in the streaming light,
the ploughmen of the azure?

Having sown what seeds,
having planted what stalks
in the realm of the wind,
upon the leveled mounts?

Being in what unknown,
behind what foliage
and in what tall grass,
near the shores of evening?

– They drink from a black source,
they uproot cresses and mints,
afterwards, laying on their backs,
watching the stars increase

until your blossoming,
O gladioli red and black,
and until the day wreaks havoc
on their lofty nests.

21

She who was born before the light,
is today her seventh day,
today as yesterday and as in eternity
without past or future?

She is reborn however
with the sleep of birds
and while the white stones hide themselves
along the paths which the goats have deserted,
as if upon shortcuts of silence.

But all you see of her is her myriad eyes,
her reptilian and triangular eyes
that open themselves one by one
among the celestial lianas.

22

At the shore of stagnant shadows,
along the embankments
hard and bare as rocks,
but where precocious herbs thrive,
countless fishermen align themselves
and cast the line.

From summits that grow round
like ripening fruits,
to vales which lengthen
and become more moist than melons,
a flight of furtive birds is aroused
and drifts of blind light
that similarly frighten
and hinder the bite.

Masters of destiny
and not anxious about anything,
the fishermen call out to each other
with their shadow voices
to tend the filaments
through which they'll give back to the sea
these fish of silver and of purple
that weave their way, imperceptibly,
through the azure.

23

Slow
as a lame cow
or a powerful bull
that's been quartered,
a large black spider comes out of the earth
and climbs over the walls,
then labors to buttress itself above the trees.

Casting threads that carry on the wind,
weaving a web that touches the sky,
and stretching nets across the azure.

Where are the multicolored birds?
Where are the songsters of sun?
– The glow is springing from their eyes
dead with sleep
within their swings of lianas,
they revive their dreams and their echoes
in this evanescence of fireflies
which become a cohort of stars
to outmaneuver the spider's ambush
that will tear the horns from a bounding calf.

24

For what fruits, for what clusters
fallen into the grass
and hidden by twigs?

For what cut gems
confused with pebbles
covered by thick fog?

Between hands calloused
and hard like bread
devoured by the sun,
the hands with webbed fingers
without colors,
here are the myriad torches
in search of what was lost
upon the earth
and what seed in the midst of the prairie grass
that became everything
that can embrace the gaze.

25

Thin plates of water, glasses sparkling
– spectacles for the near-sighted or far-sighted? –
velvet pupils
smooth as a lily's white skin
and more fragile than a baby's fingernail.

The winds are born beyond the mountains
and glide down to here where sleep the plants
they plunder then abandon.

Light aglow at their pursuit
to the sidereal wilds
strewn with thin plates of water, with glasses
and velvet pupils
silently shining
and showing a grassy path
cut across by the pebbled river,
to that one-eyed moon
who totters there
and would be led astray
by the least trembling of her lashes.

26

You built yourself a tower in the wind
then you crouched over the water,
O faceless queen
whose pointed crown
defies what will become of the rain,
and on which the misted diamonds
are made of stars, and nothing but stars.

O fair soul of what changes;
O sister and daughter, by turns,
of this newborn moon
at the edge of an orchard,
you have built in the wind
and you live on the water
like my dreams of wisdom!

What will the sudden fall do to us,
of what is our kingdom?

Like the tower, like my own,
like the false-hearted
that trample over our feet,
this joy from which sparkles our eyes,
if it should soon die out,
will it not return to us different and new?

27

Sisters of the silence in sadness,
the flowers who have nothing but their beauty
and their solitude,
the flowers – pieces of the earthly heart
beating in unison with the nests –
are they sleeping here, are they shaping dreams
about the end of their destiny?

The fingers
that wanted only their youth from them,
the fingers are joined together
within the warm whiteness of sheets –
save for my own that are so frail
and that keep with such care
the delicate affairs.

My lips also brush against the flowers,
the flowers have become more mysterious,
and more beautiful, and suddenly bold.

And I hear,
blended in with the breathing of the grasses,
their dearest confidences.
Ah! how pitiful they would be
without these peaceful perfumes, Lord,
that escape with their life!

28

Listen to the maidens of rain
pursuing each other while singing
and sliding
on rafts of clay
or sword grass blades
that cover the homes of the living.

They sing,
and their songs are so passionate
that they become sobs
and reduce to confidences ...
perhaps to better understand
this call of the bird that moves you.

A bird alone in the heart of night,
and it doesn't fear being ravished
by water sprites?
O miracle! O gift unhoped for!
Why do you return so late?
Has another taken your nest
while you were in search of a dream
at the end of the world?

29

There is a living water
which springs forth into the unknown
but moistens the wind
that you drink,
and you aspire to its discovery
behind that massive rock
broken off of some nameless star.

You lean over,
and your fingers caress the sand.
Suddenly you think back to your childhood
and to the images that charmed it –
above all to the one where these naive
but astonishing words are found:

"The Virgin Of Seven Sorrows"

And here is another living water
which never ceases to arise beneath your eyes,
but which stirs your thirst:
your shadow
– the shadow of your dreams –
becomes sevenfold
and, emerging from you,
weighs down an already heavy night.

30

Vain, all these anticipations
that claim to give us wings
and promise
that one day we'll seduce some Martian?

Vain too, the dream
that lost Icarus
more than the sun
that drank the marvelous wax?

Yet what certain triumph
announced to me by all these signs
that earth and sky send out
from the borders of sleep:

within our cities of the living
even the most humble of huts
respond to the calls of fire
bursting from newborn stars.

About the Translator

Robert Ziller is an artist, poet, translator, and singer. His artwork, with a focus on public street art, has been displayed in over 100 exhibitions in galleries and museums throughout the United States. The author of *Van Gogh Surfing,* a collection of poetry, he is also a singer and songwriter, recording with the bands Bingo Quixote and Media Circus Extravaganza!, with his MCE! song "Waterboarding" garnering attention as a GarageBand.com Track of the Day. His translation of Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo's *Translated from the Night* was the first complete text of a Rabearivelo work translated into English. Ziller presently resides in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania.